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SUBJECT: ISTANBUL AKP REPRESENTATIVES ON ELECTIONS
PROSPECTS

REF: ISTANBUL 23

Classified By: Classified By: ACTING PRINCIPAL OFFICER WIN DAYTON FOR R
EASONS 1.4(B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Istanbul,s Justice and Development Party (AKP) representatives echo the Prime Minister,s public insistence that there will not be early elections, and agree that the state of the economy and unemployment will have the greatest impact on the election results. AKP,s organizational skills and the opposition,s weak leadership or closet skeletons for now may give AKP the edge. However, since the economy is still flagging and the National Unity Project,s (NUP) popularity is waning, the race is still up for grabs and it appears unlikely that the AKP will be in any hurry to have elections soon. End Summary.

Istanbul AKP Contacts: Elections in April/May 2011!

¶2. (C) Istanbul-based AKP representatives confidently echo Prime Minister Erdogan,s public announcement that elections will be held in the spring of 2011, countering opposition calls for early elections (reftel). On January 12, AKP Chairman for Istanbul,s Besiktas municipality Ibrahim Yildirim told Acting Pol/Econ Chief that his party was expecting parliamentary elections to take place in April or May 2011. AKP Beyoglu Municipality Foreign Relations Deputy for Foreign Relations Gonca Ongan said it is unlikely that elections would take place during the summer of 2011 when the heat and holidays may dampen voter turnout. On January 13, entrepreneur and recent Istanbul AKP board member Ali Osman Tobay stated that it would not make sense for the AKP to push for early elections since more time is needed for the economy to recover and the NUP to show results.

"AKP Poll Numbers at Nadir"

¶3. (C) With possibly as much as a year and a half remaining before elections, Istanbul AKP representatives indicated it was too early to predict results but were cautiously optimistic that their party,s slide in the polls was over. Yildirim noted present polls he saw which show AKP support levels at around 35 percent are "great" considering his party has not yet started campaigning. He also said that damage to AKP ratings caused by the unpopularity of the NUP is already fully absorbed in the present polls. He went on to say that he expected AKP ratings to rise as the NUP showed results and the economy starts to improve. Tobay, who also owns the M.A.G.S advertising agency, said that he expects the economy to start improving in the second quarter of 2010. His prediction of economic improvement is based, he said, on the fact that local companies are planning to spend more on

advertising in the second quarter, thus implying that the local companies expect to have additional income to spend on advertising and hope that consumers may be more active at that time (Comment: The forecasts for 2010 economic growth in Turkey range from three to 4.5 percent. How such growth will affect unemployment by election day remains to be seen. End Comment.). Tobay agreed that the AKP has lost support because of the NUP but thought support for that effort would soon increase as the government figures out how to explain the NUP to the public. However, all of the Istanbul AKP contacts agreed that the state of unemployment and the overall economy will have the greatest impact on voter support of AKP.

Istanbul AKP,s Campaign Machine

¶4. (C) Yildirim reported that the AKP held a meeting in early January to plan its campaign. He said he thought the AKP was better organized in Istanbul than any of the other parties. Tobay also said that the AKP was well organized in Istanbul and throughout the country. He noted that one of its grass roots campaign methods, which he called "face-to-face," dates back to when the AKP,s present leaders served in the conservative Fazilet and Saadet parties. The system assigns one active AKP member for each ballot box and the 800 - 1000 voters assigned to vote at that box throughout the year. Eight "dormant" members are also assigned to each ballot box. Once the election date is formally announced, the active member trains the dormant members and they then begin intensive door-to-door campaigning.

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Sarigul as Spoiler?

¶5. (C) When asked about the chances of a coalition government forming after the election, AKP,s Yildirim perhaps predictably said that AKP could still win enough seats to rule on its own. He hoped that Sisli Mayor Mustafa Sarigul,s Turkey Change Movement (THD) would play a spoiler role similar to the role the Genc party played during the 2002 election, poaching votes from other parties while not passing the 10 percent threshold. He said that he thought Sarigul could presently receive four to five percent of the vote and hoped he would rise to around nine percent. Tobay commented that THD seemed well organized. He went on to say that if polls showing Sarigul already at 5.5 to 7.5 percent even before he announced his party were accurate, THD could possibly receive over ten percent of the vote. However, during a recent meeting, AKP Board member Nebati whispered that if Sarigul became too much of a threat, they had a file on him "this high" that would provide plenty of evidence of his corrupt and lewd behavior.

Saadet Unlikely to Draw Support from AKP Voters

¶6. (C) Regarding the AKP,s loss of possible hard-line conservative voters, Nebati, a conservative AKP member who supports Sharia law, did not think that many AKP conservatives would defect to Saadet. Nebati commented that while Saadet party leader Numan Kurtulmus is well respected among conservatives, "he does not have the leadership skills to give the party new momentum." Yildirm estimated that at the worst, AKP could lose one to two percent to Saadet. Regarding the loss of votes from businesspeople, Tobay said he had heard from some fellow Istanbul businesspeople who had high expectations when they voted for AKP. He said that some are now disappointed with AKP,s handling of the financial crisis. He worried that his party might lose the support of such individuals during the next election. However, as a businessman, he said he did not think that any of the other parties were more appealing. Tobay said that while his views

reflect conditions in Istanbul, they are relevant to the whole country since Istanbul is often a political bellwether.

Comment

17. (C) Comment: Despite the opposition's expressed predictions/hopes for 2010 elections (reftel), Istanbul AKP representatives reflect their party's perception that present economic conditions and the lack of significant NUP progress contribute to an environment not conducive to early elections. That said, other political observers have told us AKP's interest may lie in calling elections sooner rather than later, before downward trending polls tank the party's prospects. If the AKP has miscalculated, and the economy and NUP fail to progress meaningfully, a longer lead time before elections may allow other parties to overcome their current organizational handicaps and contend more seriously for a place in Parliament. End Comment.

DAYTON